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II. THE POSITION OF THE SOLILOQUY "TO BE OR NOT TO BE" IN *HAMLET*.

Among the points of superiority which distinguish the plays of Shakespeare from those of most Elizabethan dramatists, none is more obvious and more easily demonstrable than the firmly built plan, the clear construction which sets in strong relief a dominant dramatic idea. In the poet's mature tragedies, this dominant idea is always a development of what Professor Dowden calls "the fatality of character." The protagonist is hurried to the catastrophe, not so much by the irresistible force of external events, as by some defect, or some enfeebling excess in his own spiritual constitution. From the analogy of the other plays, therefore, we should expect in *Hamlet* to find little or no emphasis laid upon external hindrances to the execution of the prescribed revenge, but rather the accentuation of a purely subjective hesitancy inherent in the emotional and intellectual habits of the man himself.

Now it is a notable fact that no such plan, no such dominant dramatic idea, is apparent in the *Hamlet* printed in the quarto of 1603. Here we have a revenge play of the type discussed by Professor Thorndike two years ago¹ and built, as he pointed out, upon a common and usual formula. That the prince does not execute vengeance until the last scene we of course perceive, but why he does not, whether from lack of fit opportunity or from some other cause, we have no means of determining. It is true that he rejects the occasion when the king is praying, and for the same reason as that given in the later version, but this episode does not help us, because it is unrelated to any of his other actions. Quite the

¹ *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. xvii, pp. 125 seq.

reverse is the case in the quarto of 1604. Here, indeed, we have, what on general principles we should be led to expect of Shakespeare, a clearly constructed plan, the plain purpose of which is to give striking relief to the dominant dramatic idea, a fatal subjective hindrance to action. Hamlet has

"cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't,"

and yet lives "to say this thing's to do."

In view of this unmistakable diversity disclosed by a comparison of the texts, Richard Grant White's statement that "the Hamlet of 1603, cruelly maimed and ridiculously perverted as it is, presents the Hamlet of 1604 and 1623 complete as to design in all essential points"¹ is, to say the least, rather surprising. The one point above all others essential and at the same time most characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic art, in fact what may be called the design itself, is in no degree developed or even manifested in that "maimed and perverted" version.

For the elaboration of this design we must turn to the quarto of 1604. Here, at length, a definite structure is revealed. It consists of five clearly marked moments of resolve on Hamlet's part—and, it may be added, there are no more than these five—each aroused by some external stimulus, each so vigorous as to lead the spectator to look for the immediate execution of some scheme of vengeance, and each followed by a period of strikingly contrasted inactivity. This antithesis between strong determination and negligent lassitude is so forcibly presented and stands forth as so palpable a change from the indiscriminated progress of the action in the first edition, that it must be accepted as a distinct manifestation of the author's purpose.

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 1881, p. 470.

The first moment of resolve occurs in the scene in which the ghost divulges the facts concerning the murder. Hamlet's words,

"Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge,"

import the rapid consummation of a bloody act. Yet in the succeeding scenes, we find him pretending a madness that has no obvious purpose, heaping insults upon Polonius, discussing theatrical affairs with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and devoting his entire attention and interest to the declamation of an actor.

All this, it is true, is found also in the 1603 quarto, though not so fully developed, but the case there stands in absolute isolation. Not another antithesis between resolve and negligence can be discovered in that version. Even here it is interesting to note the significant substitution of a word, or at least a substitution that would be significant if we could trust the 1603 text.

"And thy *remembrance* all alone shall sit"

becomes in the second quarto

"And thy *commandment* all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain."

Omitting for the present the second moment of resolve, which is found in the soliloquy at the end of Act II, we observe the third in the passage immediately succeeding the performance of the play. Convinced of the king's guilt and fired with excitement, Hamlet, when at length left alone, soliloquizes briefly before going to the interview with his mother. In the first quarto, he merely determines to be "cruel not unnatural," whereas in the second, these reflections are preceded by the words

"Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on."¹

A few minutes later he spares the praying king, and his excuse, that he desires to send his uncle's soul, not to Heaven, but to Hell, while it might pass in the rude earlier Hamlet, is, on the part of the reflective gentleman represented in the second quarto, an obvious subterfuge to avoid action. The words just quoted have often been regarded as mere bombastic declamation, but, viewed as furnishing a vivid contrast between resolve and non-performance, they are certainly an essential structural element.

The fourth moment of resolve occurs in the long soliloquy after the meeting with the army of Fortinbras,

"How all occasions do inform against me
And spur my dull revenge,"

a passage found only in the second quarto. Here Hamlet concludes his reflections with a very definite determination,

"O from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth."

Yet he proceeds submissively to embark with his keepers, and when we next see him after his accidental return, he is tranquilly interrogating the grave-yard clown and meditating "too curiously" upon the achievements of "Eloquent, just and mighty Death."

At the beginning of the last scene of the tragedy, Hamlet tells Horatio the story of the opened packet in which he has substituted the names of Rosencranz and Guildenstern for his own. In the 1603 edition this incident is related to the Queen by Horatio in a separate scene inserted between that representing Ophelia's madness and that in which the king and Laertes concert the fatal plot. It is a mere narrative to

¹ The real reading is "such business as the bitter day."

advance the action and has no bearing on Hamlet's character. In the second quarto, on the contrary, Hamlet's tale furnishes the most powerful possible incentive to an instant and decisive stroke. To all the motives for revenge previously accentuated and now summed up in Hamlet's own words, there is added that of immediate personal danger.

"He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th' election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life."

In the folio the case is put even more forcibly. Horatio remarks :

"It must be shortly known from England
What is the issue of the business there."

And indeed we find the return of the ambassadors at the close of this very scene. In other words, Hamlet must strike at once, or he must pay the penalty of his sluggishness with his own life. This he fully appreciates, as his answer shows :

"It will be short,
The interim's mine, and a man's life's no more
Than to say one."

These words, it is true, do not occur in the second quarto, but one may reasonably infer that the passage was omitted by accident. That something has been lost is undeniable, for the conclusion of Hamlet's speech, as it there stands, is obviously incomplete :

"He that hath
Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
And with such cosenage, is't not perfect conscience?"

The sense demands at least "To quit him with this arm," and if these words have inadvertently dropped out, a suspicion that the rest of the conversation was missed in the same way is not unpalatable. Be this as it may, however, it does not

affect the main argument. Hamlet stands at a moment when his life must be the forfeit for even a brief delay, yet on the appearance of Osric, he enters with zest into the sport of euphuistic banter, and thence proceeds, not to the contrivance of serious measures against his mortal foe, but to a fencing match. The most impressive contrast between incentive and inactivity thus immediately precedes the catastrophe.

There is no trace of this design in the quarto of 1603; neither the moment of resolve nor the following unconcerned fooling with the courtier appears. Indeed our examination has made it evident that, while the first quarto merely tells a revenge story in dramatic form without any logical necessity in the train of events and without any fatal connection between character and catastrophe, the second quarto has achieved this necessity and this connection by the structural device of presenting a series of moments of strong incentive and vigorous resolve, each followed by an equally conspicuous inactivity.

In order to fit into this structural scheme, Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be," had to be transferred to its present position in the drama. In the quarto of 1603, as is well known, this passage directly follows the disclosure to the court by Polonius (Corambis) of Hamlet's love for Ophelia. Shortly afterward the players arrive, Hamlet listens to the declamation about Hecuba, and, stung by remorse, resolves upon the play as a means of assuring himself of the king's guilt. This resolve he puts into immediate execution, thus securing the complete demonstration which he sought.

Now this portrayal of Hamlet forming a purpose, and then energetically carrying that purpose into operation, is contrary to the fundamental idea of the tragedy as developed in the second quarto. This fundamental idea demands a structure which shall exhibit every resolve followed by inactivity.

Yet the performance of the play before the king, as an essential episode in the unfolding of the dramatic action, must be retained. Here then is the problem. How is it possible to represent the perfect execution of this resolve and, at the same time, to preserve for us a Hamlet whose moments of determination are invariably followed by inertia? The solution is at once simple and masterly. The soliloquy is transferred to a position between the conception and the representation of the play which was "to catch the conscience of the king." The actor's declamation fills Hamlet with shame at his own lack of efficiency; he determines, by unmasking the murderer, to resolve his doubts. Yet in the very next scene, instead of being concerned with the serious events now in progress, his mind, wandering far away from his task, is indulging in vague speculations upon suicide.

This famous soliloquy in its new position thus becomes one of the most striking of those moments of lassitude and inactivity which in Hamlet invariably follow the moments of resolve. It takes its essential place in the structure of a drama which represents a tragic catastrophe as springing, not from mere external accident, but from lack of harmony between character and circumstance.

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